DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 157 055 CS 204 167

AUTHOR Piper, Henry Dan
TITLE Frederick Douglass and Colloquial American Prose Style: A Study in Language Proficiency and Cultural Dominance.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the First International Conference on Frontiers in Language Proficiency and Dominance Testing (Carbondale, Illinois, August 21-23, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American Literature; Black History; *Black Literature; *Composition (Literary); Elementary Secondary Education; English Instruction; Higher Education; Language Styles; Literary Criticism; *Literary History; *Literary Styles; *Sentence Structure; Victorian Literature
IDENTIFIERS Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; *Douglass (Frederick)

ABSTRACT

From colonial days onward, colloquial speech was looked down on as inappropriate for serious writing, but with the publication of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," American colloquial style was raised to the level of high art. English teachers should encourage students to build on their own colloquial speech in their writing, rather than to abandon it in favor of a difficult literary language; the prose style of Frederick Douglass provides evidence to support this conclusion. Parallel passages from the 1845 and 1892 versions of Douglass's account of his life as a slave may be compared to show how Douglass rejected his early direct colloquial style in favor of an inflated literary style. Measures of the number of words per sentence and the number of polysyllabic words per sentence show that Douglass's later writing was similar to the inflated prose of such authors as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and James Russell Lowell, and that his earlier writing was similar to the readable, colloquial prose of such self-taught authors as Ben Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Mark Twain. English teachers should incorporate the experience and practice of these latter authors into the teaching of English composition. (GW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED157055

Frederick Douglass and Colloquial American Prose Style:

A Study in Language Proficiency and Cultural Dominance

by

Henry Dan Piper
Department of English
Southern Illinois University
at Carbondale[1]

One of the most important developments in American literary scholarship in recent years has been a growing recognition that some of our most widely-admired American literature (as distinguished from that of other English-speaking nations) is rooted stylistically in everyday American speech. What was once looked down upon by the educational establishment as vulgar vernacular we now see clearly as the foundation for some of our most eloquent writing. I am thinking particularly of such works as Benjamin Franklin's popular essays and Autobiography, the papers of Abraham Lincoln, and the fiction of Mark Twain and his many admirers, including Stephen Crane, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway.[2]

The typical colonial settler. like many Americans even today, was an illiterate or semi-literate fellow preoccupied primarily with making a living. He spoke a "street" vernacular characterized by short, simple sentences, colorful concrete imagery and metaphor, and a vocabulary consisting mostly of Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic words rather than polysyllabics of classical origin. It was the language of feelings and emotions rather than abstract thought. But this colloquial speech was traditionally looked down upon by educators as inappropriate for serious written expression. Instead, good writing was modelled upon the best classical examples. For those who had the leisure and desire to master them, these models of course had inspired a European literature of great power and nobility. But the classical style did not accomodate easily to the practical situation of the average American. What was needed was a serviceable rhetoric capable of articulating the values and attitudes of a new democratic and rapidly changing society---a literary style readily accessible to and based on the colloquial speech habits of the typical citizen. That such a literary style did indeed develop over the years outside of the academy, in the practice of many of our most eloquent writers, to emerge during the present century as the American literary style, we are only now beginning to appreciate. But it is still not understood by many academics, including teachers of English composition. An unbridgable gap of "good taste" continues to exist between the spoken style of the streets and the acceptable writing style of the classroom. Hence the uncertainty and fuzziness, the straining and over-writing, that has made too much American academic prose the laughing stock of the civilized world.

From colonial days, thoughtful observers recognized this problem and called for a "plain style" based on ordinary American speech patterns. Several far-sighted colonial clergymen recommended it as the basis for American sermons.[3] Benjamin Franklin not only echoed their pleas but demonstrated in his own newspaper essays and best-selling

CS204167

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Henry Dan Piper

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Autobiography how it should be done. Emerson and Whitman recommended it as the basis of a national literature. But it was with Mark Twain, and notably in his Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, that American colloquial style reached the level of high art. Here for the first time in an American novel a democratic vernacular style emerged that was readily accessible to the average semi-literate American reader and yet capable of expressing complex, profound moral issues and values with sensitivity and eloquence.

Huckleberry Finn exercised a liberating influence on American fiction that is still a pervasive force in contemporary writing today. It is hardly necessary to call the roll of later American writers from Stephen Crane to Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs who have explicitly or implicitly acknowledged that debt. In the words of Ernest Hemingway, "all American writing begins with a book by Mark Twain called The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."[4] Indeed, it was Hemingway more than anyone else who consciously developed Huck's oral vernacular style into the polished artistic instrument that has made it the dominant influence on twentieth-century American prose, from the journalism of Time magazine to the TV and film scripts of contemporary Hollywood.

There is surely a lesson here for those of us concerned with the teaching of English composition. The typical freshman enters the classroom in possession of eighteen years of complex, varied but often as yet unarticulated human experience. His habits of expression so far have been limited to the patterns of the language of the street. In his writing, he has often not been encouraged to express that experience in a natural, spontaneous colloquial style. Instead he has been told that he must abandon this style, and master instead a new, difficult literary language based on laws and rules prescribed by his English teacher, and abstracted from the practice of dead, unfamiliar authors. The lesson to be drawn from the study of American literature--perhaps the most important lesson it has for us--is that we must accept this colloquial spoken style and teach our students not to abandon it for something more grotesque, but rather to build upon it and refine it into an instrument more precise, sensitive, and responsive to their needs.

II

Considerable evidence to support these conclusions emerges from the study of the hitherto-neglected literary career of Frederick Douglass, one of the most gifted and articulate Black American writers of the nineteenth century. It is Douglass's prose style, as it developed over a period of fifty years in the four published versions of his autobiography, that is the subject of this essay.[5] The main facts of his life are quickly summarized.[6] Born a slave on a Maryland plantation in 1818, he escaped to freedom when he was twenty years old, settling first in an anti-slavery community in Massachusetts and later in Rochester, N.Y. There he started the first American Black abolitionist newspaper and became a nationally known figure in the anti-slavery movement. A friend of John Brown, he recruited Blacks to fight in the Civil War and traveled extensively in Europe rounding up support for the Northern cause. Afterwards, until his death in 1895, he was prominent in political and cultural affairs, serving as a U.S. Marshall in Washington, D.C., as Secretary of the Santo Domingo Arbitration Commission, and as the first American Minister to Haiti.

Today Douglass is best known for his autobiography. Its early and most eloquent chapters describe his sufferings as a slave and his struggle to teach himself to read and write. As a child he learned the alphabet from his white mistress who was instructing her own small son of the same age. But when her husband found out he angrily halted Douglass's instruction. He feared a slave who could read and write. Later Douglass secretly bribed some white children in the neighborhood to teach him to read. Teaching himself to write was more arduous. "Whenever I met any boy who could write," Douglass says, "I would proudly tell him I could write as well as he could." When the white child questioned this, Douglass would write out a sentence as best he could, and listen profitably to the white child's condescending corrections. By the time he was twenty, Douglass was secretly reading anti-slavery tracts and planning his escape North.

After settling in a friendly abolitionist community in New England, Douglass attracted the attention of several anti-slavery leaders. Among them was William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of The Liberator, the leading abolitionist newspaper. Garrison invited Douglass to talk about his experiences as a slave in public and, impressed by his natural eloquence, suggested that he write them down in a book. The result was his Narrative...of an American Slave, published with a preface by Garrison in 1845, when Douglass was twenty-eight. As Douglass became better known he was asked to bring it up to date and a second, heavily revised and expanded version was published in 1855 with the title, My Bondage and My Freedom. A third revised version, retitled The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, appeared in 1881, and this was further revised and expanded and published under the same title in 1892.[7]

It is no denigration of Douglass's remarkable career as a diplomat, newspaperman and outstanding leader of the Black American community to point out that over the years the literary quality of the successive revisions of his autobiography deteriorated. Increasingly, he rejected the simple, direct colloquial style of his 1845 Narrative and adopted instead the long-winded, over-upholstered rhetoric of the typical Victorian American man of letters. In doing so, he may have attracted more easily the attention and respect of the dominant educated white power establishment. But is played havoc with his literary style. In a sense, Douglass was like the American high school student who writes better, if more ungrammatically, when he enters the university than he does after four years of trying unsuccessfully to master standard literary English and studying from badly written textbooks. In Douglass's case this point needs particular emphasis because it has not previously been appreciated by his admirers. Thus we find Raymond W. Logan, a respected historian, saying in his introduction to a recent paperback edition of the fourth version of Douglass's autobiography, "Since Douglass, like many writers, improved his style by writing, the definitive Life and Times may be safely said to be very well written; I venture to say that by modern standards the Life and Times will earn the praise of not only the general reader but of a large number of literary critics." This is simply not so.[8]

The best way to see this is to compare the prose of the earliest 1845 version with the latest of 1892. Here, for example, are parallel versions of a representative passage. We need only compare the 400 words that Douglass needed to tell this anecdote in 1845 with the in-

flated prose of 1892 to see what has happened. Simple direct statement has been replaced by long-winded overwriting:[9]

My master and myself had quite a number of differences. He found me unsuitable for his purpose. My city life, he said, had had a very pernicious effect upon me. It had almost ruined me for every good purpose, and fitted me for every thing bad. One of my greatest faults was that of letting his horse run away, and go down to his father-in-law's farm, which was about five miles from St. Michael's. I would then have to go after it. My reason for this kind of carelessness, or carefulness, was, that I could always get something to eat when I went there. Master William Hamilton, my master's father-in-law, always gave his slaves enough to eat. I never left there hungry, no matter how great the need of my speedy return. Master Thomas at length said he would stand it no longer. I had lived with him nine months, during which time he had given me

The many differences springing up between Master Thomas and myself, owing to the clear perception I had of his character, and the boldness with which I defended myself against his capricious complaints, led him to declare that I was unsuited to his wants; that my city life had affected me perniciously; that in fact it had almost ruined me for every good purpose, and had fitted me for everything bad. One of my greatest faults, or offences, was that of letting his horse get away and go down to the farm which belonged to his father-in-law. The animal had a liking for that farm with which I fully sympathized. Whenever I let it out it would go dashing down the road to Mr. Hamilton's, as if going on a grand frolic. My horse gone, of course I must go after it. The explanation of our mutual attachment to the place is the same--the horse found good pasturage, and I found there plenty of bread. Mr. Hamilton had his faults, but starving his slaves was not one of them. He gave food in abundance, and of excellent quality. In Mr. Hamilton's cook--Aunt Mary--I found a generous and considerate friend. She never allowed me to go there without giving me bread enough to make good the deficiencies of a day or two. Master Thomas at last resolved to endure my behavior no longer; he could keep neither me nor his horse, we liked so well to be at his father-in-law's farm. I had lived with him nearly nine months and he had given me a number of severe whippings, without any visible improvement in my character or conduct, and now he was resolved to put me out, as he said, "<u>to be broken</u>."

There was, in the Bay-side, very near the campground where my master received his religious impressions, a man named Edward Covey, who en-

a number of severe whippings, all to no good purpose. He resolved to put me out, as he said, to be broken; and, for this purpose, he let me for one year to a man named Edward Covey. Mr. Covey was a poor man, a farm-renter. He rented the place upon which he lived, as also the hands with which he tilled it. Mr. Covey had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this reputation was of immense value to him. It enabled him to get his farm tilled with much less expense to himself than he could have had it done without such a reputation. Some slaveholders thought it not much loss to allow Mr. Covey to have their slaves one year, for the sake of the training to which they were subjected, without any other compensation. He could hire young help with great ease, in consequence of this joyed the reputation of being a first rate hand at breaking young Negroes. This Covey was a poor man, a farm renter, and his reputation of being a good hand to break in slaves was of immense pecuniary advantage to him, since it enabled him to get his farm tilled with very little expense, compared with what it would have cost him otherwise. Some slaveholders thought it an advantage to let Mr. Covey have the government of their slaves a year or two, almost free of charge, for the sake of the training they had under his management. Like some horsebreakers noted for their skill, who ride the best horses in the country without expense, Mr. Covey could have under him the most fiery bloods of the neighborhood, for the simple reward of returning them to their owners <u>well broken</u>. Added to the natural fitness of Mr. Covey for the duties of his profession, he was said "to enjoy religion," and he was as strict in the cultivation of piety as he was in the cultivation of his farm. I was made aware of these traits in his character by some one who had been under his hand, and while I could not look forward to going to him with any degree of pleasure, I was glad to get away from St. Michaels. I believed I should get enough to eat at Covey's, even if I suffered in other respects, and this to a hungry man is not a prospect to be regarded with indifference. (1892, <u>Life and Times</u>)

reputation. Added to the natural good qualities of Mr. Covey, he was a professor of religion--a pious soul--a member and a class-leader in the Methodist church. All of this added weight to his reputation as a "nigger-breaker." I was aware of all the facts, having been made acquainted with them by a young man who had lived there. I nevertheless made the change gladly; for I was sure of getting enough to eat, which is not the smallest consideration to a hungry man. (1845 Narrative)

The average number of words per sentence in the 1845 version is approximately seventeen; in the 1892 version it is thirty, almost twice as long. Similarly Douglass's use of polysyllabic words had doubled, from 1.2 per sentence to 2.5.[10]

Why did Douglass abandon the simple style that he had laboriously taught himself to write for the verbosity of official bureaucratic prose? One reason is suggested by a comment in the introduction to the 1845 Narrative provided by his mentor William Lloyd Garrison. In a patronizing aside Garrison explained that "Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ someone else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production; and, considering how long and how dark was the career he had run as a slave,--and how few have been his opportunities to improve his mind since he broke his iron fetters,--it is, in my judgment, highly creditable to his head and heart."[11]

But the former slave's modest style was clearly not that of the celebrated editor of The Liberator. Where Douglass wrote short, compact sentences, Garrison's prose, in his introduction to the Narrative, runs to more than twenty-nine words per sentence. Where the average sentence in Douglass's 1845 Narrative had only 1.2 polysyllabic words, Garrison's has 10.8![12]

Yet it would be unfair to blame Douglass's later inflated style solely on Garrison. The average number of words per sentence in the friendly preface contributed to the Narrative by Wendell Phillips, another New England anti-slavery leader, was also 28 words.[13] Similar results are obtained by examining the prose of other prominent publicists of the era. A random selection from editorials and essays written by William Cullen Bryant, poet, and the editor of the anti-slavery New York Post, shows an average sentence length of 33 words. James Russell Lowell, another leading abolitionist editor, poet, and diplomat, wrote a popular essay on the topic "Democracy," presumably aimed at the ordinary democrat, which has an average sentence length of 59 words![14]

On the other hand, when we turn back to the writings of native authors who successfully expressed themselves in a sturdy, readable colloquial prose hold our interest today, we find that the average number of words they used in a sentence is identical with that of Douglass's early self-taught prose. Benjamin Franklin's well-known Advice to a Young Tradesman averages seventeen words in a sentence; as does Abraham Lincoln's popular essay advising young lawyers how to express themselves in public. Random samples from expository passages in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Hemingway's first volume of short stories, In Our Time, average between 15 and 17 words per sentence.[15]

Obviously, short sentences and the avcidance of unnecessary polysyllables should not be the sole criteria for judging good writing.[16] But they help. It is important for us as teachers to recognize that they are not only present in vernacular speech but characteristic of much of the best American writing. So many of the earlier writers who introduced the colloquial prose tradition into our literature--Franklin, Lincoln, Douglass, Mark Twain--were self-taught and learned their craft outside the schoolroom. It is time now for the academy to incorporate their practice and experience into the teaching of English composition. As certified specialists we ourselves, of course, can admire and even emulate the noble, graceful prose of Cicero and Plutarch--a prose that has inspired so much fine European literature. But for those of our students not sufficiently trained and motivated, we also need to recognize the alternative, colloquial style that so many of them--unknowingly--already possess. Even though it is closer to the streets of Cicero, Illinois, than that other Cicero. We are doing them a disservice if we are not willing to accept this style and help them develop and put it usefully to work. The existence of a native colloquial literary tradition, its continuous persistence over several centuries, and the major role it has played in the development of some of the best American writing, are among the most important lessons to be learned from the study of American literature.

Notes

1. I am indebted to two graduate students, Marie O'Banner and Calvin Evans, for assistance in rechecking the word-counts mentioned in this essay and for other suggestions.
2. The best discussion of the relation between the native colloquial and American literary style is in Richard Bridgeman, The Colloquial Style in America, New York: Oxford University Press, 1966, which includes a good bibliography. Malcolm Cowley made a similar point, stressing especially the role of Mississippi Valley frontier speech, in an earlier essay: "The Middle American Style," New York Times Book Review, July 15, 1945, pp. 3, 14. See also Edmund Wilson, "The Chastening of American Prose Style," Patriotic Gore, New York: Oxford University Press, 1962; and Kenneth Lynn, Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960.
3. Howard Mumford Jones, "American Prose Style: 1700-1770," Huntington Library Bulletin, 6:115-151 (Nov. 1934).
4. Ernest Hemingway, The Green Hills of Africa, New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, Inc., 1935, pp. 20, 22.
5. See also my forthcoming article, "The Place of Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of an American Slave in the Development of a Native American Prose Style," Journal of Afro-American Issues, 5:2, Spring 1977.
6. On Douglass's life see A. W. Bontemps, Free at Last: the Life of Frederick Douglass, New York, Dodd Mead, 1971; P. S. Foner, Frederick Douglass, N.Y. Citadel Press, 1964; Benjamin Quarles, Frederick Douglass, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1968.
7. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave Written by Himself, Boston, Anti-Slavery Office 1845; repr., New York, Signet Books, New American Library, 1968. My Bondage and My Freedom, New York and Auburn, Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855; repr., New York, Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968. Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Hartford, Conn., Park Publishing Co., 1881; new rev. ed., Boston, De Wolfe, Fisher and Co., 1892; repr. New York, Collier Books, ed. Rayford W. Logan, 1962. In this essay all page citations are to the most recent printings.
8. Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, ed. by Rayford W. Logan, New York, Collier Books, 1962, pp. 16-17.
9. The passage from the 1892 Life and Times is taken from the ed., pp. 112-114; the passage from the 1845 Narrative comes from the 1968 ed., pp. 69-70.
10. The word counts per sentence reported here and elsewhere in this paper were arrived at by averaging the counts for several randomly selected passages of around 500 words each, checked by counts made by the two students mentioned in the first footnote. Since only qualitative differences were of interest, a more accurate, detailed count was not essential.
11. 1845 Narrative, 1968 printing, pp. ix-x.
12. Ibid., pp. v-xiv.
13. Ibid., pp. xv-xviii.
14. William Cullen Bryant, Prose Writings, New York, Appleton & Co., 1884., pp. 176-178. James Russell Lowell, Democracy, New York, Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1886.

15. Benjamin Franklin, "Advice to a Young Tradesman," in The American Instructor, ed., George Fisher, Philadelphia, 1748, repr. in The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, ed., L. W. Labaree, Yale University Press, III, pp. 304-308. Abraham Lincoln, Selected Speeches, Messages and Letters, ed., T. Harry Williams, New York, Rinehart & Co., 1957, pp. 33-35. Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, New York, P. F. Collier, 1884. Ernest Hemingway, In Our Time, New York, Scribner's, 1925.

16. For a good practical discussion of the role of short sentences and a minimum of polysyllables in effective writing style see the pamphlet by Robert Gunning, How to Take the Fog Out of Writing, Chicago: The Dartnell Corp., 1959, especially pp. 9-11.